

Marshall Cohen

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Danton's Death is, almost certainly, the greatest first play ever written. In it Büchner examines the political foundations of private sentiments; he defines the "epic" conditions of "absurdist" attitudes. No classical play is more relevant to the contemporary theatrical situation, and it is obvious enough why Büchner is the only playwright since Shakespeare whom Brecht and Ionesco hold in equal esteem. It is all the more distressing, therefore, that the Lincoln Center's production of *Danton's Death* should be so wrongheaded in its literary assumptions and in its theatrical techniques. Wishing to emphasize the political aspects of the play and to claim it for his Theater of Protest, Blau tampers with the text. While Büchner opens the play in a private drawing room where Danton impresses upon his wife the impossibility of "knowing" another human being, Blau establishes an entirely different tone by staging a pantomime of public entrapment against a set whose vanishing points imply "infinite" space. A similar distortion is achieved by omitting Danton's bitter, apolitical jest on the guillotine. Blau's murky, gratuitous translation is as damaging as his wanton cutting. One of its faults is to blur the distinction between the public rhetoric, often reminiscent of Schiller's, that characterizes the Jacobins, and the coarse, metaphorically daring idiom of Danton. The allusion to Schiller is important. Like Brecht, Büchner wishes to set his own historical materialism against Schiller's transcendental idealism. He opposes his own realistic sense of necessity (Woyzeck pisses in the street) to Schiller's moral cant about freedom (the Doctor proves to Woyzeck that the *musculus constrictor vesicae* is subject to the will). Büchner detests those "so-called Idealist poets who give us nothing more than marionettes with sky-blue noses and affected pathos." It is important to observe, then, that Danton is no Posa, dying for ideals that history will vindicate, no Maria Stuart experiencing the sublime and triumphing in death. A hint of this in the program would have been more to the point than Blau's effort to launch a crusade against President Johnson. Danton's "What is it in us that lies, whores, steals and murders?" is not a conundrum whose answer is "The C.I.A." (It is instead Danton's momentary attempt to evade his responsibility for the bloody September Massacres.) Danton's boredom, his longing for death and his sense of the *Fatalismus der Geschichte* are, in any case, very shaky foundations for a program of political action. Blau's tendentiousness is objectionable, but his company is intolerable. The revolution at Lincoln Center is betrayed, and the guillotine is the only solution.